

Stein Ringen: The Liberal Vision and Other Essays on Democracy and Progress

Vecernik, Jiri

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Vecernik, J. (2008). Stein Ringen: The Liberal Vision and Other Essays on Democracy and Progress. *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, 44(3), 591-593. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-59005>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Stein Ringen: *The Liberal Vision and Other Essays on Democracy and Progress*
Oxford 2007: The Bardwell Press, xiv and 203 pp.

Stein Ringen is a professor of sociology and social policy at the University of Oxford and a versatile socio-political thinker with a rich background, covering the large area between statistics and social philosophy. Between 1992 and 1996, Ringen was also a lecturer in politics and social policy at the Central European University in Prague (still existing at the time), where he organised three conferences on social policy, published in three volumes as the 'Prague Papers in Social Transition'. For his extensive cooperation with the Czech social sciences he was awarded *doctor honoris causa* from Masaryk University in April 2008.

Drawing on his wealth of experience in political science, sociology and statistics, Ringen has written several books that have had a great impact on social policy thought. The year 2007 was exceptionally fruitful in this sense. Besides the book under review, Princeton University Press published his book *What Democracy Is For: On Freedom and Moral Government*, wherein he refers to democracy as the victorious system, though more in quantitative terms (the number of democracies in the world) than in qualitative terms (how well those democracies perform). Indeed, both books expressed his strong confidence in democracy and liberalism – led by 'wide-eyed optimism' (p. 14 of the book under review). His confidence is essentially Churchillian: deeply rooted and soundly argued, without any naivety, but with an awareness of the fact that, basically, 'democracies perform pretty badly' (p. 18).

The book under review contains 18 essays collected in three parts, aptly titled 'Reason', 'Solidarity' and 'Democracy'. These are also the key concepts that must be forged and linked together. Strong beliefs combined with methodological accu-

racy have led Ringen to build on common sense and formulate visions crucial for the functioning of modern society. In his book *The Possibility of Politics* of 1987 he argued his confidence in the welfare state, rebuffing all the gloomy forecasts of its future. In one chapter of his *What Democracy Is For* and in the article 'The Truth about Class Inequality' (published in *CSR* 3, 2006), Ringen expressed his strong belief in the massive thrust of upward social mobility achieved through educational and other reforms. Against the sophisticated methods used to prove the stability of class divisions, he applied a more direct method to substantiate the obvious conclusion of falling class inequality (p. 12). As Raymond Boudon notes in the introduction to the book, Ringen knows how to translate the intuitions of common sense into words (p. xi). I would add that Ringen's informed use of statistics enables him also to prove that what is obvious is not always an illusion.

This book's starting point is that '[t]he liberal vision is simple and elementary. It starts with individual who possesses dignity by force of his or her existence as a human being and who lives this dignity through freedom and reason.' (p. 185) The idea is presented as a simple one, but it is not in reality. For Ringen, the distinction between 'liberty' and 'freedom' (a distinction that does not exist in Czech, for example) is crucial. Liberty is only a condition of freedom, while freedom is the fusion of liberty and reason. To be free is not enough, as one should also have skills and capacities 'to be reasonably able to practically live according to what one has good reasons to believe to be right and good' (p. 19). In this Ringen follows Amartya Sen and Raymond Boudon, by relating liberty to positive values and resources (both material and knowledge) that empower a person to act – and to act well.

The book offers a rich and inspiring set of ideas that cannot be easily condensed.

Yet two main and interlinked ideas matter in particular: we have to cherish and develop our visions, but challenge and test them simultaneously. Liberty, democracy and solidarity are the foundation stones of any modern society, but none of these concepts is ever accomplished and completely utilised. We should avoid – Ringen stresses – talk of crisis, since the meaning of crisis under democratic governance is that ‘governments lack the motivation, resolve, power or tools to adapt public policies to changing demands and constraints’ (p. 70).

It is this reviewer’s opinion that that the expected qualities of democratic government are in Ringen’s view not guaranteed in the ‘marketing age’. Given the existing mechanisms of the party system and electoral democracy, the next elections are usually more important for political action than the next generation’s well-being. In the Czech Republic, the balance of political forces in parliament often renders governments powerless. Alternatively, policies and institutions can fail as a result of bureaucratic and corrupt behaviour. The ‘ultimate control over collective decisions’ that in a democratic polity should lie with citizens (p. 147) is somewhat conditional. The author identifies the condition of the ‘securely institutionalised manner’ of citizens’ control, but maintaining procedures cannot guarantee that citizens will engage themselves and, if they do it is questionable whether they will be provided with the necessary information for rationale – or at least just reasonable – choice.

However, Stein Ringen is by no means a naive enthusiast. He subjects key concepts to criticism and stresses the need to challenge them, democracy in particular. Democracy has many weaknesses, and ‘even in the most democratic countries is sinking into an abyss of corruption’ (p. 186). He refers several times to Arthur Okun’s warning of the ‘transgression’ of economic power into the domain of politics. He also recalls the critical lectures of

classic political scientists such as Robert A. Dahl and the less well-known *Norwegian Study on Power and Democracy*, a long piece of research in 1998–2003, which resulted in fifty books and many studies. ‘The conclusion was not only that there are weak points in the chain but that a chain that was once solid was falling apart.’ (p. 158) Even if this was the conclusion for such a stable and solid country as Norway, what about other countries, and the post-communist states in particular?

Ringen’s way of thinking is comprehensive, fruitfully utilising ideas from the classics and from the leading modern thinkers in sociology and political science. He gains also from his personal touch, from long visits to different countries and continents. His oeuvre necessarily provokes debate – one such debate was over the stability thesis, at the Brno session of RC 28 in May 2007 (see the report by Michael L. Smith in *CSR* 6, 2007). His faith in democracy and progress contrasts sharply with, for example, the views of John Gray, the advocate of the New Right in the 1980s and then of New Labour in the 1990s, and the author of *Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000) and *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (2004), who reminds us of the failures of democracies in the past century and takes a sceptical view of the future of capitalism and democracy, particularly owing to globalisation.

Although Ringen appears to have a penchant for the word ‘mystery’ – using it, for example, to describe the true purpose of social policy – he prefers clear and transparent methodology when describing reality. His credo that ‘the right methodology for the job at hand is always the simplest one that will do the job’ was also applied in his criticism of the stability thesis mentioned above. Similarly, Ringen does not introduce any new path-breaking political-theoretical concepts, but rather uses the accustomed ones in order to question them, and then to develop, probe, and fine-tune

their usefulness. The book's recommendations are ambitious. Ringen advocates the extension of voting rights to children, the tying of supra-national decision-making to the democratic chains of power, and the re-introduction of local democracy. In particular, voters should be empowered instead of parties, concretely, by distributing party funds in the form of vouchers. These suggested innovations are certainly visionary and brave. However, channels to improve democracy for a better use in the future must pass through democracy as it exists today, with all its corruption and imperfections.

Jiří Večerník

*Institute of Sociology, Academy of Sciences
of the Czech Republic, Prague*

Chris Hasselmann: *Policy Reform and the Development of Democracy in Eastern Europe*

Aldershot (UK) and Burlington, VT (USA)
2007: Ashgate, 196 pp.

During the 1990s a vast number of studies ventured to explore the complexities of political and economic transitions or *transformations* in Central and Eastern Europe. Regrettably, the numerous and often very detailed and extensive investigations of democratisation and market reform processes in the region for the most part omitted a comprehensive discussion of policy and especially social policy. The end of the decade brought about a welcome change to this trend. Many scholars 'rediscovered' the significance of the welfare state, and of pension reform in particular, as one of the most fundamental and potentially perilous elements of this unprecedented historic change. Today, however, much too often analyses pay insufficient attention to the domestic and international contexts that shape policy making and policy outcomes. In this regard, Chris Hasselmann's book

is a welcome exception. His study aims to connect three processes that are rarely analysed together and compared on the basis of detailed empirical evidence: democratisation, privatisation (market reform), and social policy (pension) reform.

The attempt to explain the complex politics of welfare state reform in connection to the emerging system of new interest groups deserves particular attention as an original and potentially theoretically rewarding premise of the book. Hasselmann seeks to demonstrate the existence of a causal link between the privatisation process and its outcomes, producing both 'winners' and 'losers', and specific groups and individuals mobilised in an effort to shape the process of pension reform in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. All this, the author claims, provides solid proof of the success of democratic consolidation in the region.

By far the book's greatest strength lies in its analysis of the politics of pension reform in each country and in the convincing argument in favour of the predominant role of domestic actors. The author demonstrates broad knowledge of all cases. Yet it would help the analysis considerably to include at least sample data on pension spending. Hungary stands out as the most thoroughly researched example of the extremely convoluted and frequently misunderstood struggle for pension reform during the 1990s. The few omissions or errors are mostly confined to the other two cases, Poland and the Czech Republic. For example, the Polish Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) opposed mandatory private accounts for a long time, especially since this idea was first introduced in Poland in 1991, long before the famous World Bank report of 1994 was publicised there. Also, the role of stakeholders and various actors involved in the process of pension reform could be expanded and explained a little better. For instance, there is no mention of the close fusion of union and governmental